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‘The Suspect’ Review: Collateral Damage

Richard Jewell was the first to spot the deadly bomb at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics—and was rewarded with accusations of being the bomber.



Richard Jewell, a security guard at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta. PHOTO: DANA JEWELL

By Edward Kosner

Nov. 11, 2019 6:46 pm ET

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The last thing the FBI needs at the moment is a painstaking re-examination of one of the most embarrassing episodes in its long and mostly effective history. But a new book about the bureau’s hunt for the man who planted a bomb at the 1996 Summer Olympics shows the G-men at their bureaucratic worst. The victims were not only the dead and maimed but also a bumbling security guard named Richard Jewell, who was stigmatized for life by the FBI and the media.

Intensively reported and fluidly written, “The Suspect” details the yearslong search for the real killer. It’s the work of Kent Alexander, who was the U.S. attorney in Atlanta at the time of the crime, and Kevin Salwen, a former Wall Street Journal correspondent, and it is a cautionary tale about the fallibility of the storied feds, the role of luck in breaking big cases, and the conflicted choices faced by the media even at the dawn of the digital age.

The terror attack in Atlanta on July 27, 1996, should have been a textbook case for the FBI. One of its top security experts worked for years with the planners of the extravaganza, the 100th anniversary of the modern Olympics, which drew athletes from 197 nations and millions of spectators. The organizers hired thousands of men and women to augment the security provided by city, state and federal agencies. One of them was Richard Jewell, a well-meaning but inept 33-year-old who had lost a police job and was working as a rent-a-cop at a local college.

Jewell, as zealous as he was pudgy, got himself assigned to a prime location in Centennial Park, the vast space at the heart of the Olympic festivities where crowds gathered each night for concerts and other entertainment. He eyeballed every ID and color-coded wristband, watched passersby for suspicious behavior, and inspected anything left on the ground or under cover. Around 12:30 a.m. on July 27, Jewell spotted an olive-green backpack under a bench. He alerted a state agent. Soon officers cordoned the crowd away while bomb-squad experts examined the backpack. A bomb-disposal team was summoned, but at 1:20 a.m., before they could arrive, the bomb went off.

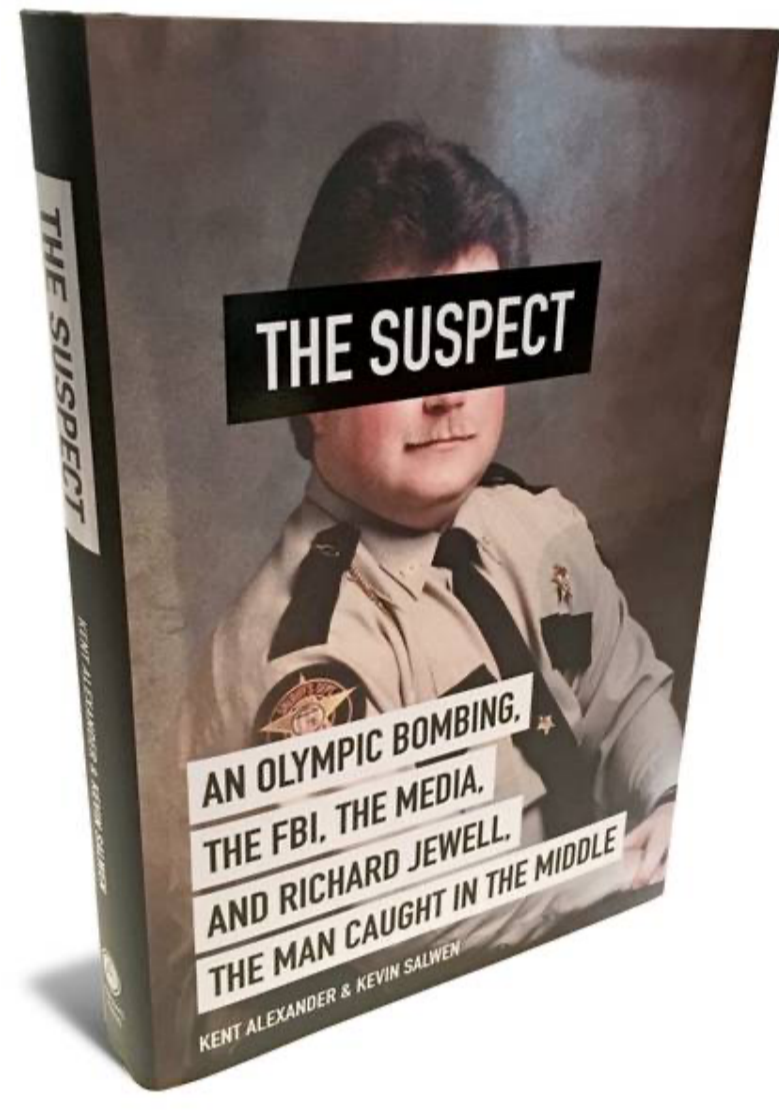


PHOTO: WSJ

THE SUSPECT

By Kent Alexander & Kevin Salwen
Abrams, 359 pages, \$28

The blast killed one person and riddled more than a hundred others with nails and shrapnel. The FBI and other investigators swung into action. They interviewed eyewitnesses, collected thousands of photos and videos, retrieved fragments from victims’ bodies, had sketches made of possible suspects, and commissioned a profile of the likely bomber from the FBI’s celebrated behavioral unit. The rise of anti-government militias triggered by confrontations in preceding years at Ruby Ridge in Idaho and the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas, only intensified the pressure to crack the case.

Somehow they kept coming back to Richard Jewell, although he adamantly denied any wrongdoing and there was no evidence tying him to the crime. The fact that it was Jewell who had pointed out the backpack to other security workers convinced some FBI agents that he was the prime suspect—a wannabe cop planting and then “finding” the bomb to turn himself into a hero.

The authors draw detailed portraits of many players in the drama, including Don Johnson, the agent most certain that Jewell was his man, and Kathy Scruggs, an ambitious, “strikingly beautiful” police reporter for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Over drinks at a dark bar, Johnson leaked to Scruggs that Jewell was the prime suspect. The story was soon splashed around the world, and Jewell’s life was changed forever. On NBC, the Olympics network, Tom Brokaw speculated that the FBI had enough to arrest Jewell. Without ever charging him, the FBI tossed the home he shared with his distraught mother for evidence and used a ruse to read him his Miranda rights without specifying that he was a suspect. They gave him a lie-detector test and wired up one of his confidants. Media hordes camped outside his home, and agents tailed him.

Beyond his denials, there was a big hole in the case against Jewell. Twenty-two minutes before the blast, a man had called 911 and said: “There is a bomb in Centennial Park. You have 30 minutes.” The voice could not remotely be Jewell’s. Either it was an accomplice or the real bomber.

After a year, the FBI had conducted 13,000 interviews and chased 14,000 leads, but had no bomber. A group of savvy lawyers now represented Jewell. They ultimately forced the feds to issue a “no target” letter, essentially clearing him. And they set about collecting millions in libel and defamation awards from media outlets and others who had played a part in the press gang-up. Many of the suits were successful even though the initial report that he was a key suspect had been true at the time. Kathy Scruggs, who broke that story, and Johnson, the FBI agent who leaked it to her, died within a few years of the collapse of the case. Jewell died of complications of diabetes at 44 in 2007.

The real bomber doesn’t appear until page 215 of “The Suspect.” He turned out to be Eric Rudolph, 29, a crazed anti-government renegade who considered television the “electric Jew” and joined the Army to learn how to fight the U.S. government. Six months after the Olympic blast, Rudolph bombed a suburban Atlanta building containing an abortion clinic. A month later, he hit a club that catered to a sexually and racially diverse crowd. He sent letters to the media bragging of the attacks, then disappeared into the wilderness of western North Carolina. Nearly seven years after the Olympic bombing, the case was solved: Rudolph was caught scavenging for food at 3:30 a.m. in an alley in tiny Murphy, N.C.—not by the vaunted FBI but by a rookie cop checking for prowlers.

The authors conclude with a fervent if unrealistic plea for the media patiently to presume innocence over guilt, for law enforcement to plug leaks, and for the public to favor accuracy over speed in news coverage. “A named suspect,” they write, “might even turn out to be a hero.”

Mr. Kosner is the author of “It’s News to Me,” a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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